

AN OUTLINE OF CONTEMPORARY DRAMA

BY
THOMAS H. DICKINSON



HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
BOSTON NEW YORK CHICAGO SAN FRANCISCO
The Riverside Press Cambridge

PREFACE

IN the book that is before us two qualities will, without doubt, be remarked. These are the wide extent and inclusiveness of its subject-matter, and the rigorous condensation of its treatment. Perhaps there will be those who will claim that the subject-matter is too broad, that by no stretch of meaning can the term "contemporary" be enlarged to cover the movements of a hundred years. To these objections, which at first view appear to be valid, it can only be answered that if the term "contemporary" has any critical meaning for our time, this meaning must go beyond the mere accidents of date and inhere in those qualities that make the theater of our time a different theater from any that has gone before. If we are to understand the differentiating qualities of the current drama of Europe and America, we must seek for these in the social, intellectual, and art events of the early nineteenth century. Herein lies the best justification for the broad inclusiveness of this book. As to its quality of condensation perhaps few will be found to raise objections. Readers will ask only that whatever its length the book present the facts of contemporary drama fairly in their proper emphasis and relationship.

Any book that seeks to outline the history of an art form works under definite limitations. These limitations should be faced and admitted. They arise from the fact that many of the qualities that give vitality and beauty to a work of imagination are beyond the reach of the his-

PREFACE

torical critic. These are essentially the "art" qualities that spring from the creative genius of the artist. No survey can reproduce them or bring again that rare meeting of creative mind and appropriate moment that distinguishes every significant work of creative imagination. There is left then for the historical critic the evaluation and representation of the primary urgencies and motives, the implied interests and ideas, the changing standards, formulas, and movements underlying or accompanying the art, but not themselves constituting it. Lacking the means to expound the mysterious vitality of the plant itself, we can in such a book as this only outline the plan of the garden and show how it has been cultivated by successive generations of workers into its present form. Here we have the chief reason why no general outline should ever be depended upon alone for an understanding of the drama. The best value of an outline will come from its use in connection with the study of the plays themselves.

For the errors of judgment and fact in this book the author alone is responsible. And yet it goes without saying that the book could not have been written had there not existed the accumulated researches of drama students in all countries. Nothing is more significant than the revival of interest in the theater in our day. Of this revival there have been assiduous exponents and commentators: in America, Brander Matthews, Archibald Henderson, Montrose J. Moses, Ludwig Lewisohn, Barrett H. Clark, Clayton Hamilton; in England, William Archer, A. B. Walkley, Allardyce Nicoll; in France, A. Filon, E. Faguet, Benoist-Hanappier, R. Doumic; in Germany, Otto Brahm, Paul Schlenther, R. F. Arnold;

PREFACE

and others in each country too numerous to mention. The obligations to those named and to others listed in bibliographies are constant.

THOMAS H. DICKINSON

REFERENCES

THE references to plays at the heads of chapters are to works in the following books, published by Houghton Mifflin Company:

Chief European Dramatists, edited by Brander Matthews.

Chief Contemporary Dramatists, First and Second Series, edited by Thomas H. Dickinson.

Contemporary Plays, edited by Thomas H. Dickinson and Jack R. Crawford.

Chief British Dramatists, edited by Brander Matthews and P. R. Lieder.

CONTENTS

BOOK ONE

THE ROOTS OF CONTEMPORARY DRAMA

I. A SURVEY AND A SUMMARY	3
II. THE DECLINE OF THE ROMANTIC PLAY	6
III. THE RISE OF THE POPULAR THEATER	18
IV. THE DRAMA OF IDEAS	34
V. FORERUNNERS	48
VI. HENRIK IBSEN	62

BOOK TWO

THE DRAMATIC REVIVAL

VII. THE FREEING OF THE THEATERS	93
VIII. BEGINNINGS OF THE NATURALISTIC MOVE- MENT	110
IX. THE DRAMATIC REVIVAL OF THE NINETIES	128
X. GERHART HAUPTMANN	152
XI. MAURICE MAETERLINCK	165
XII. AUGUST STRINDBERG	179
XIII. GEORGE BERNARD SHAW	194
XIV. THE NEW ROMANCE	208

BOOK THREE

TWENTIETH-CENTURY DRAMA

XV. THE TURN OF THE CENTURY	223
XVI. THE NEW ART OF THE THEATER	237
XVII. COMEDY AND FANTASY	249
XVIII. THE FUTURISTIC DRAMA	262
XIX. A SUMMARY OF CONTEMPORARY DRAMA BY COUNTRIES	279
INDEX	289

AN OUTLINE OF
CONTEMPORARY DRAMA



BOOK ONE

THE ROOTS OF CONTEMPORARY DRAMA

AN OUTLINE OF CONTEMPORARY DRAMA

• •
•

CHAPTER ONE

A SURVEY AND A SUMMARY

International Scope of the Drama — Periods of Contemporary Drama —
Factors of the Contemporary Play

International scope of the drama THIS book outlines the developments in dramatic composition in England, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Russia, the Scandinavian countries, and America during the contemporary period. For the purposes of this survey these developments are treated as having international scope, and as occurring on the stage of the Western world of Europe and America, rather than as restricted by national boundary lines. For the convenience of those who wish to follow the purely national developments in drama during the period under review, there is added to the Third Book a chapter containing lists of the chief dramatists of the several nations by periods and types of plays.

Periods of contemporary drama In this study the activities of contemporary playwriting are treated as falling into three periods as follows:

1. *The First Period*, which contains the roots of contemporary drama, includes the events in the history of the theater from the beginning of the nineteenth century

THE ROOTS OF CONTEMPORARY DRAMA

until the late eighteen-eighties. This period covers the decline of romanticism, the rise of the popular play, the development of the thesis and problem play, and culminates in the work of Ibsen. This period is treated in the First Book.

2. *The Second Period*, which is an era of theatrical revival, covers the events in theatrical organization and playwriting from the late eighteen-eighties until the beginning of the new century. Within a period of fifteen years there occur the reorganization of the theater, the rise of the naturalistic play, and that burst of creative genius that placed the theater in a high position among the activities of the time. This period is treated in the Second Book.

3. *The Third Period*, which is an era of artistic experiment, covers the activities in playwriting and production from the opening of the twentieth century to the present. Chief among the developments of this period has been the enlargement of the conception of play construction from that of literary composition to that of a synthesis of the arts. With this have come, naturally, violations of former literary restraints and conventions; as well as various experiments toward new conventions of the theater. This period is treated in the Third Book.

Factors of the contemporary play It will be noted that, during the periods above outlined, there has been a progressive change in the theories of what constitutes a play. These theories vary so from time to time that no purpose would be served by attempting to make a hard-and-fast definition of drama, or of the dramatic. But the raw material, upon which the imagination of the play-

A SURVEY AND A SUMMARY

wright works, can, at least for purposes of suggestion and classification, be isolated. Of the raw material of contemporary drama four factors stand out:

- (1) The factors derived from the literary tradition of the theater;
- (2) The factors derived from the folk theater and folk ceremonial;
- (3) The factors derived from current psychology and social issues;
- (4) The factors derived from the non-literary arts.

The factors mentioned above are not mutually exclusive. No claim is made that they satisfy all theories as to what constitutes a play as a work of art or as a product of social imagination. The classification by factors is offered merely for suggestion and as a guide to be kept in mind in employing the condensed outline of contemporary drama that follows.

CHAPTER TWO

THE DECLINE OF THE ROMANTIC PLAY

Classical and Romantic Drama — Fate and Free Will in Drama — The Storm and Stress Movement — Goethe and Schiller — The French Romantic Revival — Victor Hugo — Romanticism and Revolt — The Bourgeois Drama — The New Form — Decline of the Romantic Play

In Chief European Dramatists:

Hernani, by Victor Hugo, in translation by Mrs. Newton Crosland.

Götz von Berlichingen, by Wolfgang von Goethe, in translation by Sir Walter Scott.

Wilhelm Tell, by Friedrich Schiller, as translated by Sir Theodore Martin.

Drama not a branch of literature AMONG the factors mentioned in our opening chapter as constituting the modern play the first, or literary factor, has long been given the most serious consideration. Like the novel and the lyric, drama was supposed to be a form of literature. As literature, plays were read in the library, studied in the schools, recited from the platform. It is not difficult to see how this conception of drama arose. The drama was an art of words. Its records were kept from generation to generation on the printed page. The great plays of the past, of Sophocles, of Shakespeare, were great poems which were read and studied in the same way in which Virgil and Dante were read and studied. In their interest in the substance derived from the printed page people too seldom stopped to think that the original drama that had created the fame of Sophocles and Shakespeare was based on many elements of which literature was but one. In the nineteenth century the importance of these other factors came to be realized on a wide scale. And men began to act on the idea that drama and literature were

THE DECLINE OF THE ROMANTIC PLAY

not one art, but different and separate arts. As the literary tradition of the play declined, they began to call more and more upon factors derived from folk habits, the current interests of the crowd, and the resources of the other arts. In so doing they were returning the play to its original form in which verse and the refinements of language were only incidental features.

*Classical
versus ro-
mantic
drama*

The decline of the literary tradition of the drama had been foreshadowed in the contest which had been waged between the great schools of dramatic composition. The theories of classical drama, based upon the writings of the Greek tragedians and their Roman imitators, had, at the Renaissance, been inserted again into the fabric of modern culture. In the hands of Racine and Corneille, Voltaire, and Dryden, classical drama had obtained a strong hold upon the literary stage. Against this form of drama the romantic play had found its origin entirely in modern times. Speaking roughly there are two sources of romantic drama, the plays of Shakespeare, his precursors and followers, and the plays of Lope de Vega and of Calderon. The sources of English and Spanish romantic drama are distinct, but their influences blend in the later current which is to sweep the stage of Europe and is to lead directly into the drama of the present.

*Differences
between clas-
sicism and
romanticism*

What were the important differences between the classical and the romantic play? On the one hand these differences concerned matters of form. The classical play was as

THE ROOTS OF CONTEMPORARY DRAMA

a rule regular in form, it obeyed the unities; it submitted itself to the controls of discipline in the expression of emotion. Establishing an objective standard and maintaining it in strictness, it never lightened the tension by comic appeal or by lyrical outbursts. It differentiated neatly between tragedy and comedy. Quite unlike this was the romantic play. It was irregular, inspired, and sometimes overleaped the barriers of discipline in the expression of feeling; it was subjective; it mingled tragedy and comedy; it broke into lyrical strains. In other words, while the classical play was controlled by abstract standards, the romantic play was inspired by human motives and passions.

*Fate and
Free Will*

These external differences indicated deeper oppositions within. In all that is known as motive and psychology the gulf between the classical and the romantic drama was as profound as that which lies between the minds of the ancient and the modern world. The classical dramatist considered the universe to be at the command of an external power wielded in an arbitrary manner. The actions of men were circumscribed and conditioned by an external Fate. The romantic drama treated the world of events as if this world were molded and played upon by the wills of men. In the one drama Fate was the essential feature; in the other, Will. It is not hard to see which drama would be preferred by an age which had produced the American and the French Revolutions and had read Rousseau. The romantic drama answered the call of modern times.

THE DECLINE OF THE ROMANTIC PLAY

The battle of the classics and the moderns For more than two centuries these two forms and philosophies contended for the control of the literary drama of Europe. The hold of the classic tradition was strong. But both from England and from Spain the influence of the romantic drama moved irresistibly. The victory of romanticism is first seen in the increasing vogue of Shakespeare in the theater of Europe. Lessing's *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* of 1768-69, the Shakespearian performances of Friedrich Ludwig Schröder in 1776, and the Schlegel-Tieck translations of 1797-1833 started the current in Germany. In France the influence of Shakespeare moved more slowly, but the Letourneau translations of 1776-81, the visits of the English tragedians to Paris in 1822 and 1828, led the way to the romantic revival of Hugo, Dumas père, and their followers.

The "storm and stress" movement By the beginning of the nineteenth century the greatest poets of all lands were trying their hands at plays written in the English or the Spanish manner. This means that these men were trying to interpret in elevated poetic form the "human" or common interests of man. A movement that set its stamp on all the subsequent history of the stage was the "storm and stress" movement of Germany. Established by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, and reaching its height in the dramatic work of Goethe and Schiller, the German storm and stress movement is one of the foundation stones of the modern drama. It based an opposition against the pseudo-classicism of France on an appeal to the universality of Shakespeare. With the playwrights of the storm and stress school the modern theater

THE ROOTS OF CONTEMPORARY DRAMA

comes to grips with modern life. The gigantic passions that moved the plot were derived from the new social energies and enthusiasms. The temper and interests of the storm and stress movement still recur from time to time in contemporary drama.

In many respects Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) and Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805) stand at the threshold of the modern era of drama. They ally themselves with the literary drama of the past; as they grow older they tend more toward the abstract controls of classicism, and away from the burning human enthusiasms of youth. And yet both in their youth wrote plays containing promises of the coming age. Among Goethe's storm and stress plays were *Götz von Berlichingen*, 1773, and *Clavigo*, 1774. Like the work of young Goethe the earliest work of Schiller was inspired by rebellion. *Die Räuber*, 1781, *Fiesco*, 1783, *Kabale und Liebe*, 1784, were in the current of later drama.

The romantic revival in France Second only to the storm and stress movement in supplying the energy by which the modern theater has been motivated is the romantic revival in the French theater. Victor Hugo and his fellows turned to romanticism in reaction against the dullness and uniformity of French classicism. The same force of human enthusiasm that turned the young poet toward the passionate interests of men later turned the romancer over to social issues and campaigns of reform. Hugo's opinions are expressed in his Preface to the play of *Cromwell* published in 1827. He holds that the supreme justification of drama is the sense of life that it presents. This he would obtain in drama in the same way that it is manifested in life, by ironic and grotesque

THE DECLINE OF THE ROMANTIC PLAY

antitheses, by vivid contrasts, by a continual mingling of the expected and the surprising. Hugo holds that it is false to build an art alone on "abstract types of purely metaphysical idea." In these ideas of Hugo's it is not hard to find many promises of later naturalism. But he was not a naturalist; he was not indeed entirely successful in putting into effect his own theories. He was a great poet who enunciated the doctrine that destroyed the power of classicism in its stronghold, and by his energy and social vision prepared the way for the new era in the theater.

Victor Hugo (1802-85), poet, dramatist, and reformer, did all his playwriting between his twenty-fifth and his fortieth years. Among his plays are *Cromwell*, 1827, *Marion de Lorme*, 1829, *Hernani*, 1830, *Le Roi s'amuse*, 1832, *Lucrèce Borgia*, 1833, *Marie Tudor*, 1833, *Ruy Blas*, 1838, *Les Burgraves*, 1843. Second to Hugo as the creator of the romantic movement in the French theater was Alexandre Dumas père (1802-70). Among his plays, which were characterized by great vitality and popular appeal, are *Henri III et sa cour*, 1829, *Christine*, 1830, *Napoléon Bonaparte*, 1831, *La Tour de Nesle*, 1832.

Romanticism and revolt For our purposes the significance of the struggle between romanticism and classicism lies in the introduction of the motive of *revolt* into contemporary drama. The classical drama had been built on the standards of a theater that had withstood the changes of two thousand years. It had been supported by the world of aristocracy and learning having its capital in Paris. Against this there now appeared a new and untried form of drama written originally by men from outside culture's breastworks, a drama unformed, negligent